

WHAT WILL PEOPLE SAY?

By RUPERT HUGHES

With illustrations by James Montgomery Flagg

IV--At the Door of Her Heart

FORBES was prompt at the opera. Though it was barely half past seven, he found the foyer already swarming with a bustling mob of women swaddled in opera cloaks, and prosperous-looking men overcoated and muffled. The head usher directed him up a brief flight of steps, and another attendant unlocked a door marked with the name plate of Lindsey Tait.

When Forbes stepped to the edge of the box, he seemed to be the entire audience, another mad King of Bavaria come to witness a performance in solitude.

But when he took the next step forward he found a multitude. Above him saw other horsehoes in tiers dense as faces peering downward. Below him a plain of Babel inhabited by the heads, numberless pates in long rows, the men's skulls close-cropped or bald, and their shoulders black; women's elaborately coiffed, over enormous acreage of bared shoulders.

The prelude was one long stream of ter-sweet honey, and it affected Forbes as music had never affected him: wondered how people could ever ve ridiculed or resisted this man agner. He wished that Persis would come soon. He thought of her as "Isolde"; he could not nk of her as Miss Cabot to this mu-

The first act was ended and the long mission almost over before she arrived, with Enslie, followed immediately by Bob and Winifred, and last of all the hostess, Mrs. Neff.

Persis dropped into a chair on the right. Winifred pushed Mrs. Neff into a chair on the left. Persis looked at the chair behind her, Bob leaping took that of Winifred, and motioned Forbes to the center chair. Then Mrs. Neff beckoned him to hunch forward into the narrow space between her and Persis.

Forbes pretended to be looking over his audience on his right, but he was looking at Persis.

She was a combination of beauty undorned and most adorned. Despite ver trappings of gem and fabric, even more of her was candidly presented than at the theater last night—or was it not a year ago? Surely he must have known her for more than a day.

The second act of the opera proved to be hardly more than a prolonged quiet. The rapture of it outlasted Forbes' endurance; it did not bore him, it wore him out.

The woman next him was becoming more beautiful every moment. He felt a craving to touch her—with reverence; to link arms in comradeship, and to clench hands with her when the music stormed the peaks.

An aura seemed to transpire mistily from his pores to meet the aureole that shimmered about her.

But Fate can play the clown as well as the tragedian, and accomplish as much by an absurd accident as by elaborate glooms.

That afternoon, when Forbes was lured into the haberdashery, he had invested in black silk hosiery, very sheer and very dear. Later he had acquired a pair of new pumps. The shoes were not too small, but their rigid edge cut his instep like a dull knife. By the time that Isolde's husband had found her in Tristan's arms, and begun to deplore his friend's treachery at great length, the pressure upon Forbes' heart relaxed enough to let his feet attract his attention. They proclaimed their discomfort acutely.

After some hesitation he resolved to slip them off of their glistening jails a moment, under cover of the darkness.

A sense of immense relief rejoiced him when he sat with his silk-stocking of feet perched on top of the inside of his shoes. Though he was unaware of it, he was not the only one in that box to seize the opportunity. Heaven alone knew how much empty footgear was scattered along the floors of that opera house. Persis for one had vacated her slippers long ago. She always did at every opportunity.

Eventually she tucked her little left foot back of her and bent it round the leg of her chair. By and by Forbes, in shifting his position, straightened his right knee, foot collided with a most smooth something, and paused in a kind of surprise. Primarily our feet had as much tactile intelligence as our hands, and Forbes' almost prehensile big toe pondered that tiny promontory a second; then it hastily explored the glossy surface of Persis' sole.

Silk is a facile conductor of electricity, and Persis was not divine enough to be above ticklishness. Shudders of exquisite torment ran through her before she could snatch her foot away. And before she could check the impulse she snickered aloud.

And Forbes, suddenly understanding what he had done, snickered, too, and just managed to throttle down a loud guffaw.

Mrs. Neff and Winifred turned in amazement at hearing such a sound at such a time, and the women in the next box craned their necks to inflict a punitive glare. Which made it all the worse.

Persis would have taken to flight, but one of her slippers she could not find, and she could not get the other on.

She and Forbes were still stuffing their handkerchiefs into their mouths when the act ended, as the pitifully distraught Tristan permitted the infuriated Isolde to thrust him through with a sword, and fell back in Kurwenal's arms.

Willie Enslie was acutely annoyed. He had not curiosity enough to be quick to jealousy, nor intelligence enough to suspect that Persis' and Forbes' laughter might be, must be, due to some encounter.

Still, he had ideals of his own, such as they were, and his religion was to avoid attracting attention. He had liked Persis because she was of the same faith; but now she had sinned against it, and he rebuked her. She did not flare up as usual. She laughed.

She was ashamed to have been so frivolous, ashamed to have profaned the temple of art with her childishness. And so was Forbes. But when they looked into each other's eyes now they no longer stared with timorous wonder; they smiled together in a dear and cozy intimacy. And already they owned a secret.

Willie was furious at Persis' lack of dignity, and forgot his own in complaining of it.

"Cut out the soubrette spasms, for God's sake, Persis, or let us all in on the joke. If you have any comic relief for this ghastly opera let me have it. Why did you drag me here, anyway? Why didn't we go to Bellevue Hospital and watch an amusing operation? What would you say to making a sneak just about now and—"

"I'd say, run right along, Willie, if you want to," said Persis. "Moi, j'y suis, j'en passe!"

"Oh, all right. I suppose I'll have to suit and rest, too. But don't mind if I snore."

Ten Eyck appeared now with apologies for his delay. And a number of callers knocked at the back door of the box and were admitted to an informal little reception, shared by the next-door neighbors, who gossiped across the rail with a charming friendliness. These latter were determined to find out what Persis had been laughing at. But she shook her head mysteriously.

The third act brought him back under the Wagnerian yoke. Tristan's castle walls ran along a cliff overlooking the ocean; in a green space under a tree the wounded knight lay eternally demanding of his devoted squire if he could not yet see the ship, the ship that was to bring Isolde to nurse him back to life.

The thrall of the theater was so complete upon Forbes that when the sorrowful drone of the shepherd's pipe suddenly turned to joy at the sight of Isolde's ship, Forbes' heart leaped up as if he were witnessing a rescue in actual life.

The hurrying rapture of the music that described Isolde's arrival, and her haste up the cliff, sent his hopes to heaven; but when the delirious Tristan rose from his couch to his staggering feet and began to tear at the bandages about his wound, Forbes felt the stab of fear. He wanted to cry out, "Oh, no!" He sat with lips parted in anguish, and his hand groping for support.

The left hand of Persis was reaching about in the same gesture of protest against intolerable cruelty. It met the hand of Forbes. Their fingers clutched each other in an instinct of companionship. The two souls were so intent upon the action of the scene, and so swept along by the torrential music, that they hardly knew their hands were joined.

The music was a love-philter to Forbes and Persis; they could not escape it, had not thought of escape. Their hands swung in a little arc, clenched and unclenched in an utter sympathy of mind and body, in a kind of epic dance.

And then the opera was over, and Forbes began to dread the raising of the lights. He was grateful for the long ovation to the singers, since it kept the house dark till he could shake off the tears that he was ashamed to dab with a handkerchief. Time was when greater soldiers than he were proud rather than ashamed of their tears, but Forbes was thankful for the gloom. He applauded and joined the cries of "Bravo!" to prolong the respite.

Then he noted that Persis was not applauding. She was pulling off a long glove slowly and wincingly. When it was off, she looked ruefully at her left hand and nursed it in her right. She glanced to see that the others were busy with their wraps, then she held her hand out where Forbes could see it; and gave him a look of pouting reproach.

He saw, too, that on one of the little fingers there was a thread of blood. The alert old eyes of Mrs. Neff caught the by-play of the two, and her curiosity brought her forward with a question.

"How in heaven did you hurt your finger?"

Persis answered quietly and at once: "I caught it on the thorn of a rose. It's nothing."

Forbes was compelled to silence by Persis' explanation of the accident. He must not say how sorry he was, though he had wounded her—he had wounded Persis till she bled!

He waited till the waiter for the carriage, a wealthy rabble stood in a draughty doorway waiting turns at the slowly disintegrating army of limousines and landaulets and touring cars and taxicabs—even of obsolete broughams and coaches drawn by four-legged anachronisms.

Mrs. Neff claimed Forbes as her personal escort, and carried him off in her own chariot, which rolled up long before Enslie's.

Forbes regretted to leave Persis standing there, with throat open as usual to the night gale; but his consolation was that he could gossip about her.

Mrs. Neff's first word, of course, was of tobacco. The door was hardly slammed upon them before she had her cigarettes out.

Once her weed was prospering, she began to puff gossip:

"Isn't she a darling—Miss Cabot, I mean? Everybody is crazy over her, but Willie scares 'em all off. What a pity she's mixed up with the little boomer! Of course, she needs a lot of money, and her lot of a father is nearly ready for the Old Ladies' Home; but what a shame that love and money go together so rarely! For the matter of that, though, I don't think Persis knows what love is—yet. Maybe she never will. Maybe she won't learn till it's too late. Murray Ten Eyck says you are rich. Why don't you marry Persis? What a pair you'd make!"

Forbes was much obliged to the dark for hiding his blushes. He made bold to ask a leading question:

"You say that Miss Cabot is mixed up hopelessly with Mr. Enslie. Do you mean that they are engaged?"

"They haven't announced it, of course, but it's generally agreed that they are. Still, I suppose that if some handsome devil came along with a million or two, he might coax her away."

They went through the revolving doors and into the corridor, where women in opera cloaks were moving forward with something of the look of a spice caravan, some to the supper-rooms, and some toward the elevators to the various assembly-rooms, where various coteries were giving dances.

The ways of Mrs. Neff and Forbes parted at the elevator's upper door. His led to the large room where he passed his hat and coat across a table to be stored in a compartment in one of the wicker wardrobes.

While Forbes was waiting for Mrs. Neff, he saw Persis arrive with her entourage. She was like the rest, yet ever so different. In her there was the little more that meant so much. She had, of course, the advantage of his affection. Yet he could see that every body else gave her a certain prestige, too. It was "Oh, there she is!" "Look there, Persis!" "Hello, Persis, now darling of you to come!"

The fly in the ointment was Willie Enslie, preening himself at her side, taking all her compliments for his own. He was, of course, the proprietor of a prize-winning mare at a horse show. Forbes hated himself for hating him, but could not help it. When Enslie left Persis and entered the men's coatroom, Forbes' she were mortified there. The very concord of their bodies seemed an argument for the union of their souls.

Once more Forbes was master of Persis; she followed wherever he led. He could whirl her, dip her, sidle her, lead or pursue her; and she obeyed his will as instantly as if he were her own-er. She did belong to him. How could he ever give her up? And yet at the moment the orchestra stopped he must let her go.

The end of the dance was their divorce. He transferred her into Bob Fielding's arms for a time, while he swung Winifred with as much rapture as he would have taken from trundling a bureau around. Even Winifred's surprising lightness of foot reminded Forbes of nothing more poetic than casters.

After this ordeal a strict sense of duty forced him to dance with Mrs. Neff once more. And after her with an anonymous sprig, to whom Mrs. Neff bequeathed him. And then, at last, he was free to tango with Persis again.

At the close of the dance, the hour being somewhat past midnight, supper was announced. Persis seized upon one of the small tables, and stood guard over it which she despatched Forbes to round up Mrs. Neff and Willie and Bob and Winifred, and Ten Eyck and a debutante he was rushing.

Persis saw to it quite casually that Forbes sat close to her; and that was very close, since the little clique was crowded so snugly about the table, that half of those who ate had to convey the food across the elbows and knees of the others.

Persis sat with both elbows on the table, and raised her bouillon cup with both hands. Her elbow touched that of Forbes, and she did not draw it away. For the matter of that, all the elbows were clashing in the crowded circle.

It was now that Forbes was tempted to make his first advance. How show his love except by some signal? Before all those ears he could not speak his intention.

Under the table he might have held hands with her, but she kept her hands above the board. Then, as she leaned close to him to speak across him to Mrs. Neff, her foot struck lightly against his. It was gone at once, but it suggested to his mind an ancient form of flirtation that has been more honored in modern observance than in modern literature. Remembering the experience at the opera house, he was visited with a tender temptation to renew that acquaintance of feet.

He gathered his courage together, as if he were about to step off a precipice into a fog, and pursued her foot with his. He found it, but at a touch it vanished again. Realizing that she took his silly action for an accident, he determined to see the adventure through. He sent his foot prowling after hers, found it, and raising his toe, pressed hers softly.

This time her foot was not withdrawn, and he felt that his emprise was rewarded. But a moment later, when every one's attention was attracted to another table, and the rest were discussing a prematurely fashionable costume, Persis leaned close to him and murmured:

"In the first place, how dare you? In the second place, I have on white slippers. And in the third place, you are perfectly visible from all the other tables."

And then she slipped her foot away. It was as if she had unclasped his arms from about her waist, only not so hallowed a precedent.

Forbes turned pale with shame. He felt that his deed was boorish, and now

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it had been properly rebuked and re-sented. The gentleness of the reproof made it the more galling; for it was the gentleness of authority so sure of itself that it needed no clamor of as-sertion.

He gnawed his lip with remorse; but his apologies were frustrated by the re-turn of all hands to the table. Persis chattered with the rest and nibbled a mignon with an apparent relish that im-plied forgetfulness of what was only an incident to her.

After the supper no time was lost in returning to the main business of the meeting. Again Willie claimed the first dance, and Forbes was deputed to Ten Eyck's debutante. The next dance, however, brought him back to Persis. He had asked her for it, un-casualy, and she had granted it with an amiable "Of course."

The moment they were safely lost in the vortex he began to make amends. While he was strutting his proudest through the tango, he was stammering the humblest apologies.

"Oh, don't let that worry you," she answered. "I suppose all men believe they have to do that sort of thing to entertain us. Poor fellows, you think we women expect it of you. Some of us do, I suppose; but I don't like it. And it doesn't seem quite what I had expected of you."

And yet something was gone from her warmth. She danced with him, chatted, laughed. But a chill was upon her. That little bloom of tenderness that had softened her words as the downy velvet the peach, had vanished. Frost had nipped the first of spring.

Forbes was infinitely repentant, re-buffed, but not routed. He began once

and their feet were frolic, but his voice was solemn as a prayer. "If you are not, I want to tell you that you have— you are—that—well, my heart is at your feet."

"Watch out, then, for I can't see my feet, and my heels are sharp."

"You are the frivolous one. You've only just met me; you don't know anything about me, nor I about you, yet you talk this talk."

"I've known you long enough to know that you are serious."

"Oh, no, you haven't. You've only seen me with my party manners on."

"You haven't answered my question. Are you engaged to that man?"

"Oh, so he is 'that man' already?"

"Are you going to marry him?"

"I'm no prophet, Mr. Forbes."

The medley broke into the ribald tune of a popular song. Half the dancers shouted the refrain as they whirled.

Forbes' heart selected from the sor-did lyric only its rejoicing. He selected from Persis' words only the hope they negatively implied. He began to dance in a frenzy, locking knee to knee, whipping her off her feet, and clenching her sweet body so close to him that she gasped:

"I have to breathe, you know."

"Forgive me," he murmured into the curls about her ear. "But you're a wonderful thing!"

"Am I?" she laughed, but with a sort of patient indifference.

"I wish I dared to tell you that I love you."

"I hope you won't."

"Men are always telling you that?"

"No—not always—once or twice."

She was so far away, though in his arms, that her voice seemed to come to him across a long wire.

"Did you love any of them?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"There's nothing I'm surer of than that."

"Does that mean that you are not en-gaged to Mr. Enslie?"

"Yes."

"May I ride there, too?"

"That's not very encouraging."

"Isn't it? Well, haven't you been a trifle discouraging yourself?"

"I'm terribly sorry," he pleaded; and she surprised him by sighing:

"I'm rather glad."

inly, knowing just what he meant. She resolved to be sensible and cut the silly romance out of her hopes. She could save her father, and have all the hats in the world. She must not keep Willie waiting. He might not wait. It was in this mood that Forbes had first seen her and her old hat from the bus.

At home she had found Willie. As she walked into the drawing-room he was pacing up and down rehearsing his proposal in whispers. He went into a blue funk at the sight of her, and she had the greatest difficulty in coaxing him to propose. Then she accepted him with proper surprise.

Willie had brought the ring—a wonder-ful composition by Rene Lalique. It was the edge of that ring that had cut her finger till it bled under the fierce grip of Forbes' hand at a performance of "Tristan and Isolde."

Thoughts like this danced through Persis' mind now, while her body danced in Forbes' arms. And Forbes was talking of his jealousy!

Forbes was different from Willie in so many ways. He could be loved. She did not love him now. But he was of the type that women love. She wondered, rather helplessly, if she were going to love him.

She would not be indiscreet, of course, or disloyal in any important way. But—After all, she might not marry Willie. She might marry Mr. Forbes. All things were possible. Why not this?

Luckily Forbes had money. He was surely not so rich as Willie. But then Persis was not mercenary. She wanted only a reasonable amount—just enough to keep up with the procession. Surely Mr. Forbes must have enough money for such a simple household.

Meanwhile he was pounding at the door of her heart again:

"Are you going to ride in Central Park tomorrow—this morning?" he said.

"Yes."

"May I ride there, too?"

"That's not very encouraging."

"Isn't it? Well, haven't you been a trifle discouraging yourself?"

"I'm terribly sorry," he pleaded; and she surprised him by sighing:

"I'm rather glad."

"Glad? Why?"

"Because I had come dangerously near to feeling that you were—differ-ent."

"I am," he cried, stung by the deep significance of her light regret. "Please let me prove it. Please let me ride with you in the park."

"I'll be with my father, you know," she answered, with a trace of relent-ment. "It's my only chance to visit with the poor old boy. You'd better not."

"But some day you will ride with me."

"Maybe."

"Tomorrow may I stand on the bridge and watch you go by?"

"The park is open to the public at all hours."

"Would you mind if I got a horse and rode by and said 'Good morning'?"

"Fine. Come along. I'll introduce you to my father."

"I'll be there."

Persis had not misjudged Forbes. If she had told him then that she was an-other man's betrothed, he would have changed his whole attitude toward her.

Equally, the romance would have ended before it began if Forbes had told Persis that he was not rich, as Ten Eyck had carelessly assumed.

He had dropped the question of her betrothal to Enslie, sure that it was a paradox. Now he realized that he had no further promise of meeting Persis except on horseback and with her father alongside. He put forth an antenna.

"Am I ever going to see you again?"

"I shouldn't be at all surprised," she answered, blowing neither cold nor hot.

"Tomorrow?"

"Maybe."

"Where?"

"Oh, I'll probably be dancing at some tea-place or other, as usual."

He was hoping that she would ask him to call, but she failed to take the hook. He surprised himself by saying with an abrupt rashness:

"Will you take lunch with me to-morrow?"

He had a vision of a charming little hour alone with her in the solitude made by a crowd. She missed the point, and asked:

"Do you mean all of us?"

"I suppose I do. I reckon I wouldn't dare ask you alone."

"I reckon you betta hadn't," she said, mocking his accent as best she could.

He smiled at her burlesque, but per-sisted:

"How would you like to—to give the party and order the foder? I'm just back from the Philippines, you know. I could get up a mess for my company, but I'm afraid I couldn't feed you people to your liking."

She was tempted to seize the chance. She checked herself on the brink of acceptance, realizing that it would set people talking if she conducted Forbes' entertainments for him.

"I'll tell you," she said. "Ask Mrs. Neff to be the hostess. You're under some obligations to her, and none to me."

"I'm afraid I don't know what to have."

"Is the simplest thing in the world. Just go to the Ritz-Carlton and ask for Fernand. Tell him I'm coming, and I said for him to take good care of you—of us. And now let's see who can come."